

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 AMMAN 004722

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/RA LAWON, NEA/IPA RATNEY, OES/PCI SHIPPE
STATE PASS USAID DAVID O'BRIEN
TELAVIV FOR GUMBINER
JERUSALEM FOR RANZ

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/20/2007

TAGS: [SENV](#) [PREL](#) [JO](#) [MEPN](#)

SUBJECT: ARAB-ISRAELI COOPERATION--MERC MAKES THE GRADE

Classified By: DCM GREGORY L. BERRY, REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) An embassy survey of Jordanian scientists collaborating with Israeli counterparts on MERC (Middle East Regional Cooperation) projects confirmed that, despite the tense political climate in the region, the projects generally are on track. Creative measures have been taken to maintain momentum and continue the cooperative spirit of MERC. While many of those we interviewed stated personal anger toward Israel since the second Intifada began in September 2000, their personal and professional relationships with Israeli colleagues remained intact. On the whole, Jordanian MERC scientists seem to have been able to separate their politics and emotions from their professional activities. Staying above the emotionally charged political fray speaks volumes about the success of MERC in fostering these kinds of enduring people-to-people contacts. End Summary.

MERC-urial JORDANIAN/ISRAELI RELATIONS?

2. (SBU) In an effort to gauge the effect of the Intifada and deteriorating political and security climate on the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) projects with a Jordanian component, we sounded out a small sampling of Jordanian participants. These projects, funded through the Middle East Peace Process mechanism and administered by USAID, typically have 3-year funding cycles and project budgets ranging from several hundred thousand dollars to two million dollars. MERC's mission is to encourage scientific cooperation between Israelis and Arabs by funding collaborative projects on topics of mutual concern to the core parties which may improve the social, economic, or health conditions of the population. The MERC projects undergo rigorous scientific peer review before approval. Each project must include an Israeli scientist and at least one Arab scientist from the region. US scientists may also participate, but not as a buffer to direct cooperation. Currently, there are 19 active MERC projects, most of which applied and received funding approval before September 2000, the beginning of the second Intifada.

3. (SBU) For this report, we interviewed 10 Jordanian scientists or individuals that are actively working on MERC projects. We investigated the impact of two years of political unrest on their ability to sustain momentum on the MERC projects. Not surprisingly, most MERC projects underwent significant changes with the onset of the Intifada. These changes, from the logistical to the emotional to the philosophical, reflect corresponding shifts within Jordanian society's attitudes towards relations with its Israeli neighbors.

4. (SBU) Nevertheless, the status of those MERC projects we investigated gives hope. A very few projects are not functioning and have been postponed indefinitely, while some have had great, even inspirational, success despite the Intifada. In some rare cases, other participants have initiated totally new cooperative projects after the violence began. Generally speaking, MERC projects remain on track, despite the difficult and sensitive political situation.

BALANCING THE INTIFADA WITH REGIONAL COOPERATION

5. (SBU) All ongoing MERC projects have necessarily transformed, as the violence of the Intifada became the status quo. The most obvious changes were logistical, as joint work necessitating border crossings between Jordan and Israel became increasingly difficult for both practical and political reasons. The most commonly reported adjustments had to do both with the cancellation of, or relocation and reduced frequency of, scheduled meetings. In most cases, MERC participants were scheduled to meet on a regular basis and rotate the location of the meetings between the

participating countries, something that became increasingly difficult over time.

16. (SBU) With the beginning of the Intifada, travel became much more difficult, especially travel to Israel. Travel anywhere by participating Palestinian scientists ebbed and flowed with the closures on the ground. More than half of the scientists we spoke to said that at least a few meetings had been cancelled, and some individuals admitted they were unable to hold entire series of meetings. Alternate meeting spots outside the Middle East, such as Cyprus, were often arranged, but it wasn't just that the number of meetings dropped, but also the quality of the meetings that were able to take place diminished.

17. (SBU) In about half of the projects that also involved a Palestinian component, Palestinian partners were not able to attend the meetings. In other cases, the rotation of meeting locations was meant to provide site visits and training on specialized equipment, most often located in Israel, which could not take place with the outbreak of the Intifada. In one project, training on medical equipment in Israel which was vital to the second phase of the project did not take place because of the inability of Jordanian and Palestinian scientists to get entry visas (MERC Project Number M17-055).

18. (SBU) Projects also suffered because of the necessary postponement or canceling of research, as a result of security concerns on both sides of the Jordan River. In the most extreme example, a MERC project on seismic calibration (M18-035) was postponed indefinitely after the Israeli and Jordanian militaries prevented scientists from conducting controlled underground explosions in the Jordan Valley necessary for the research.

PEER PRESSURE ON CAMPUS

19. (SBU) All of the university scientists we met acknowledged they felt some form of pressure to postpone their work with their Israeli counterparts. The pressure took several forms-- peer pressure, personal convictions/philosophy, and external professional pressure.

110. (SBU) Most of the interviewees, with one exception (M21-065), said that their superiors knew about their participation in the MERC program, and, in most cases, had openly encouraged them to participate when the projects were in their planning stages before September 2000. Most of those interviewed did remark, however, that, while their superiors approved of their continued participation in MERC, they were extremely concerned that their participation not become public.

111. (SBU) Of greater concern to the university scientists was the perception by their professional colleagues of their Israeli collaboration. Most of our meetings with university scientists were held furtively, behind closed doors and with no acknowledgment of the meeting when interrupted by phone calls. Many of the university scientists took pains to keep not only their MERC participation but also our interview itself as discreet as possible, in one extreme case even asking the interviewer not to come in an embassy car or tell anyone at the university why you are here.⁸ All the university scientists confided to us that most of their colleagues did not know of their Israeli collaboration, and that if they did, it could be used against them in department turf battles, personal disagreements, or passed on to student groups that are notorious opponents of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel. We noted that most of the MERC scientists interviewed had no knowledge of other professors participating on MERC projects, even when those colleagues were in collocated departments.

TOEING THE PARTY LINE AT THE MINISTRY

112. (SBU) The government scientists, in contrast, were extremely open about their participation in the MERC program. These meetings were held openly, literally with doors left ajar. In this public sphere, cooperation with the Israelis was taken for granted in many cases, and the MERC projects were by no means the only projects with an Israeli component their offices had worked on. Despite the personal convictions of the government scientists, which may have been antithetical to Israeli collaboration, most felt sincerely that their cooperation was an integral element of their job and therefore never considered ending their participation.

SOUL SEARCHING

113. (SBU) Most scientists went through some degree of soul-searching regarding their work with Israelis, despite

the fact that most of them never truly considered leaving the projects. Often this personal examination ebbed and flowed with the fluctuating situation on the ground, despite most scientists reporting good to excellent relationships with the Israeli individuals they worked with. Opinions about Israelis generally ran the gamut from considering them &normal people who have elected terrible leaders⁸ to &cold-blooded child-killers.⁸ Many MERC participants reflected, rather emotionally, that they &just don't feel good⁸ about working with Israelis, and that they have had to justify their continued participation to themselves, as well as to others, by placing their scientific endeavors above politics.

¶14. (C) Half of those interviewed said they felt some degree of pressure from their extended families, especially those Jordanian scientists of Palestinian heritage. 30% of the scientists said they made a deliberate effort to not disclose their Israeli collaboration to their extended families for fear that it would elicit too much &talk⁸ about town and reflect negatively on the entire household. In the end, only two scientists, Palestinian-Jordanian brothers, claimed that their personal convictions led them to postpone their participation (M21-012). One brother, s highly visible position as President of a Jordanian university likely contributed to their inability or unwillingness to continue their cooperation at this time.

ISLAMISTS*BARK WORSE THAN BITE

¶15. (C) By far, the type of pressure most widely felt by all the scientists came from organizations such as student groups and professional associations. For the university scientists especially, fear of the politically active student groups, with their newspapers, anti-normalization pamphlets, and blacklists, constituted the biggest threat. Most of our interlocutors put the number of Islamists and radically anti-normalization students at 10-15% of the university student body, but described them as extremely organized and active on campus, thus attributing to them greater clout than their numbers might dictate. For many university scientists, being blacklisted could make them targets of demonstrations, petitions, and, in some cases, physical violence. At the time of our survey, a Jordanian university president had recently been stabbed by a student, and a third of those MERC participants cited this as an example of political violence they could face should their names be associated with Israeli collaboration.

¶16. (C) Almost as prominent was the fear of being blacklisted or targeted by the Islamist-dominated professional associations, such as the engineers syndicate. Most feared they would be expelled from their respective syndicates, and that their professional reputations could be severely tarnished by being listed in the associations, publications as an &Israeli collaborator.⁸ One interviewee confided to us that in the beginning of his project he appeared often on Israeli TV, each time after which he received threatening phone calls from members of the Jordanian Doctors, Syndicate telling him to cease his participation or face expulsion (M17-055). He since has toned-down his public profile in the project, but cites the support and patronage of the current Minister of Health as a reason he continues to have job security.

¶17. (C) When pushed about the possible outcomes of being blacklisted, most scientists admitted that concrete, negative results would be minimal. One interviewee who was blacklisted in the past year said that, despite his anger over the publication of his name, inclusion on the list did him little harm personally, and no damage to him professionally. (M21-065) Many of the scientists mentioned that, despite the fact that being blacklisted would generate talk and attract undue attention, the accusations and threats of the student groups and professional associations in reality &had no teeth.⁸ With the exception of one scientist who said he was questioned for four hours by the Jordanian intelligence service about his participation in a MERC project and who believes his phone is currently monitored, none of the scientists felt any pressure from the GOJ. In the end, the moderate (if quietly so) stance of both the GOJ and university administrations is what allows these scientists to continue their work.

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

¶18. (SBU) Despite logistical problems and societal pressures posed by working with the Israelis, those interviewed showed a great deal of creativity in overcoming these challenges and continuing their work. In many cases, research goals were adjusted or, more commonly, MERC scientists creatively maneuvered their way around the problems in order to continue

work.

19. (SBU) In one case, Jordanian students were still sent to Israel for training, despite the fact that the interviewed scientist had to pay them double the original per diem (M20-068). More commonly, some scientists would add an extra day onto personal travel in order to meet with their Israeli counterparts in a third country. In addition, many of our Jordanian interlocutors reported that Palestinian counterparts would spend an extra day in Amman upon return from abroad in order to be trained by Jordanians, even when the political climate prevented them from continuing their work in the West Bank or Gaza.

&EAST8 VERSUS &WEST8

20. (C) Throughout the interviews, two major themes emerged: the split between Jordanian East Bankers and Palestinian-Jordanians (West Bankers) on their view of Israelis; and the importance of &professional ethics8 in keeping projects on track.

21. (C) Our interviews revealed the somewhat schizophrenic nature of Jordanian society's relationship with Israel. Those surveyed ranged from a Christian East Banker who viewed Palestinians as the greatest threat now facing Jordan to Palestinian-Jordanian scientists who have family living under curfew in the West Bank. This range of social backgrounds produced a corresponding wide array of opinions on the conflict and their participation in the MERC program.

22. (C) East Bankers were less virulent in their condemnation of Israeli policy, and were much more open to continuing work with individual Israeli scientists than were Palestinian-Jordanians. Many of them described their experiences on the projects as &excellent8, and had only positive interaction with their Israeli counterparts. Most spoke to their belief that cooperation and continued interaction between the two countries was the only option, and most often self-identified as &pro-peace8. In the words of one East Bank scientist, &Jordan has no option but to go West.8 A few of the East Bank scientists went so far as to call themselves &pioneers,8 one of whom dismissed the pressure he is now under by philosophizing that &those of us who start things are bound to suffer. In 20 years, everyone will be working with the Israelis, and I will be seen as one of the first.8

23. (C) In contrast, the Palestinian-Jordanians spoke more vehemently against Israeli policy, often discoursing about Israeli occupation and Israeli policy personified in Ariel Sharon. Despite the fact that all of the Palestinian-Jordanians described positive, even friendly personal relationships with Israeli counterparts, most still admitted that they, at times, still felt uncomfortable in their presence. On the whole, the Palestinian-Jordanian scientists seemed less able than the East Bankers to see their Israeli counterparts as individuals. One Palestinian-Jordanian shared with us his views: &You know, this Israeli, he,s not a bad guy. I don,t think he likes what,s happening. But you know, in Israel, they,re all in the army. Even this guy goes a few times a year. I don,t know that he,s killed children, but he,s part of it. They,re all part of it.8

SCIENCE TRUMPS POLITICS

24. (SBU) Regardless of the diverse opinions of Israelis expressed by the Jordanian scientists, only one MERC project (M21-012) postponed work indefinitely because of the Intifada. All of the other participants continued their cooperation, whether grudgingly or happily, citing their professionalism as the principal reason. Repeatedly, we heard statements like, &I,m a scientist, not a politician;8 &My work is science, I leave politics out of it;8 or &I,m a professional; I don,t let politics interfere in my work.8 Nearly all of the scientists seemed to hold strong convictions that, whether out of professional duty to their position, financial responsibility to their institution, the pure advancement of science or even a strong belief in peace, their participation in the MERC was not up for debate.

25. (SBU) All the members of our sample were members of professions that have an overarching ethic--doctors, scientists, and academics. These &professional ethics8 appear to be contributing to the ongoing success of the MERC program, especially helping to overcome some of the personal anger about the current violence that might have otherwise derailed some projects. In all but two cases, personal feelings came second to professional convictions and a commitment to science, health, or regional peace.

COMMENT: PROOF OF THE PUDDING IS NEVER IN THE EATING

126. (SBU) Two years after the renewed outbreak of violence, most MERC projects can still be considered success stories of regional cooperation, and the support of the government of Jordan as well as the professions the MERC scientists hail from are likely a strong element of their success. Moreover, the Jordanian scientists shared with us their enthusiasm for joining the MERC program because they recognized the intrinsic value of knowledge acquisition from Israeli and American colleagues. The important role professional ethics plays in keeping projects active lies in stark contrast to those other attempts at fostering peace through people-to-people exchanges based on little more than breaking bread (or eating hommos) together.

127. (SBU) We have similar positive experience in the context of the Multilateral Working Groups on Water Resources and the Environment. In these two fora, Israeli scientists routinely collaborate with their Arab counterparts on issues such as watershed management, environmental curricula, and combating desertification. These successful experiences show the continuing effectiveness of bridging the political divide through objective and less emotionally sensitive scientific endeavors like MERC.

GNEHM